

Interview with the Slytherin Child

Summary: AU. A press conference after Hogwarts Castle is captured by an unknown attacker turns surreal for Rita Skeeter. She gets more of an exclusive story than she ever imagined. Dark!Harry. A short, multi-chaptered fiction.

Part I: The Public Interview

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Rita Skeeter was running flat out as fast as she could. It didn't matter that she was in acid green heels. She moved like a pack of dementors were straight behind her, like a competing reporter was going to get a scoop before she managed to claw it away from him. She was not going to miss whatever this grand, mad revelation was.

She'd covered the muck of political campaigns, the goriest of divorce contests, Death Eater trials, formal dueling challenges and their bloody results, even messily nasty scandals that were largely of Skeeter's own manufacture. All presented to the public with her own brand of special commentary. But it wasn't every day that the conqueror of Hogwarts Castle – whoever it may be, the press didn't yet know who – called a press conference.

She'd received the owl less than three minutes ago. The conference was due to begin in four minutes. Whoever this demon was, he sure left things to the last minute.

While she ran from Hogsmeade, she tried to review the little she knew about the situation. It had been three days since the takeover, but the facts were still dribbling out. Apparently the overly cocksure attacker had warned all those staying at Hogwarts on July 30th to leave by the dawn of the 31st. A few were naturally gone over the summer break, but there were twelve persons still in the castle when the deadline passed, including Albus Dumbledore himself.

Then the battle ensued the next morning. About all that anyone could determine was that it concluded very rapidly. One source pegged it at twenty-two minutes from beginning to end, no one escaped.

No one had been able to enter the castle since then or even get onto the grounds. It was like the place had become a fortress without the use of any walls or guards or turrets. The wards were so thick with magic that they almost felt solid to the touch nowadays.

Skeeter collected her hundreds of questions. She'd been fomenting most of the general unrest within the wizarding world with her articles and columns, under her own name and her dozens of pseudonyms. Now she wanted some juicy quotes to fill up her column inches for the next few days or maybe even a week. She wanted to keep her name at the top of a hundred column inches every day.

She nearly ran into the back of the wretched Oddment Lovegood when she arrived at the small gathering of worldwide journalists. Her lips pursed in general frustration. She'd have to get up to her old tricks if she was going to secure some sort of exclusive coverage of this little event. She was already plotting.

Then, Albus Dumbledore – was he still a Headmaster if his school had been captured by the enemy? – walked out the main gates of the castle and started processing slowly toward the outer gate, where the reporters were gathered. He seemed to be followed out by a levitating stone basin. It could be a Pensieve, possibly, but Rita had never seen one quite that large before.

Albus arrived in front of the increasingly large gaggle of reporters. “Good morning,” he said, in a drawn, sad voice.

“I have several unpleasant tasks I must do this morning...”

“Excuse me,” Oddment Lovegood shouted out, “why are you giving this conference? I thought the conqueror would be addressing us...”

“He appointed me in his place, Mr. Lovegood. His letter to you only invited you to a press conference; it did not mention who would be delivering it.”

The cadre of impatient, and agitated, reporters settled down so that Dumbledore would continue to speak.

“My first duty is to lay out some ground work for the rest of the conversation. I do this against my will – and my better judgment – but I must say these things for the rest of this to seem credible, I suppose. I have brought a pensieve so that I may show you how I truly defeated the Dark Lord Grindelwald, a story I have refused to share until now.”

The crowd of reporters murmured. Surely this tidbit would be interesting, but it wasn't as fresh or relevant as who had taken over Hogwarts. Still, they seemed to realize that there was a procession of events. Perhaps ancient history would give way to more interesting, more relevant, and more recent history.

An image sparked up then and hovered above the edge of the pensieve. Rita was capturing every detail she could.

Then Dumbledore started to narrate. “It was the final days of the war, back in 1945. The Muggle Hitler was holed up in Berlin. But Grindelwald had abandoned his puppet by then; he fled to a small town in Austria. I learned where he was and – as you can see – I disguised myself, walked up to him on the streets near the small house where he was holed up, and killed him. Then I killed each of his remaining supporters.”

The pensieve image showed all that – and more. It was truly brutal what Dumbledore had done. He hadn't used the Avada Kedavra curse. No, he'd beheaded every one of his opponents by chaining together his severing curses. The scared, unprepared individuals barely had time to draw their wands against the brutal ambush. Dumbledore easily felled seven people before the memory stopped.

“I didn't talk about it. It wasn't good or noble or proper, of course. It wasn't a battle; no, it was cold-blooded murder that I committed, a revenge killing, justice as it were for my wife and unborn son who'd fallen to Grindelwald twelve years earlier.” Here he seemed to hesitate before he continued to speak. “There was another complication, of course. A magical cold-blooded murder of any sort creates a schism inside one's soul; nothing can stop that. Time alone can heal it, at least partially. But I did not wait. I took the next step

and decided to make use of this 'advantage.' I pushed that soul fragment out of my mind and into a receptacle – a Dark artifact I manufactured known as a horcrux...”

That was news, the crew of reporters understood. Rita was writing furiously in her tiny little notebook. No time for a Quick Quotes Quill. The real news was good enough for print this time, explosive as it was.

“...and that’s how I find myself here today. I was granted all the powers given by the horcrux – suspended aging, immortality; that’s why I grew my beard, of course, to hide my true age and lack of progression – I did not know about the complications of the dark device. To my everlasting detriment, others did. My horcrux was recently discovered and used against me. I am now in thrall to the person, who refuses to allow me to name him, who conquered the castle. In fact, I was his chief aid in the overthrow. I no longer control my own actions in any meaningful way.”

Here the questions were lobbed toward Dumbledore.

“Why’d you do it?” The reporter was obviously fishing for information on the horcrux.

“Immortality is a rather strong temptation, Ms. Price. I’d saved the Wizarding World from a Dark Lord. I rather thought I was entitled to a very special reward, even if I was ashamed of it. Black magic can tamper with one’s morality; it can tempt the whitest of the white into horrible actions. People can be upstanding leaders and dark deviants at the same time, you know.”

“The wizarding world has painted a rather heroic final battle between you and Dieter Grindelwald. How did that come to be?”

Albus tipped his head to the question. It was obviously something he was eager to discuss.

“I said nothing. Others interpreted my silence as nobility, as reluctant heroism. They created what they wished; a story worthy of the feat, worthy of the Order of Merlin I only reluctantly accepted.”

“Why are you telling us this now?”

Albus nodded. “I was told to. I was told to permanently ruin my own reputation as partial penance for the sins I have committed. And, it was also necessary for you to understand about horcruxes. They are powerful and tricky and intoxicating. But they are also beyond dark, black, corrosive, and deeply flawed pieces of magic. Indeed, all of the ancient myths and legends of the djinn – or, more popularly, of genies inside a lamp – are actually stories about witches or wizards discovering poorly guarded horcruxes and then taking them over and controlling the spirits within. Like the famed Aladdin and his lamp; a children’s story to muggles, but in reality, Aladdin was well known as a wizard in ancient Persia and he became strong, ridiculously so, through his tutelage at the knee of the djinn he discovered inside that lamp. All djinn such as Aladdin’s were once witches and wizards who managed to lose their bodies but not their immortality, hence their perpetual spirit forms. They cannot die; yet they must answer to one strong enough to successfully possess the horcrux housing that djinn or soul fragment. Many throughout history, like Aladdin, like Alexander the Great, and others, have risen to heights of power by coming across a horcrux and besting it, controlling it, wielding it. It is no mean thing to have an immortal magical servant capable of any feat of magic; wars can be won with such a secret alone. In my case, as I am still among the living and not in spirit form, my entire body is at the command of the one who holds my horcrux. And, no, I did not choose a lamp or lantern to hold that portion of my soul.”

The joke fell flat. Reporters were too busy writing.

“Additionally, I was commanded to reveal some facts that the Ministry of Magic has not released to you; indeed, these facts have been labeled Top Secret.” That only increased the interest level of the people gathered there. “Azkaban was stormed and razed to the ground two weeks ago today.”

The expected, stunned silence wasn’t there. No, the whole area filled with questions immediately.

“Who escaped?”

“Who stormed it?”

“Why did someone raze it?”

“What happened to the Dementors?”

“What happened to Sirius Black?”

That final shouted question brought everyone else up cold. Sirius Black! Free. The reporters began casting looks around their surroundings. No one seemed to feel particularly safe, even in the middle of a clearing just in front of the Hogwarts outer gate, even in the daylight.

“The one who stormed Hogwarts was the one who took Azkaban – and he I cannot name at this time. The Dementors were pushed into the ocean, magically frozen, and should perish as they starve to death, far removed from the souls they fed upon. As for the prisoners, they were all removed from the prison. All of them were questioned – retried, as it were. It turns out that seven inmates of Azkaban never received trials of any sort. Five of them were innocent of their accusations, including Mr. Sirius Black...”

Rita scowled. “That’s a terrible lie.”

Other reporters shouted out their own editorials: “Is this ‘Conqueror’ setting himself up as a new Dark Lord?” “Preposterous hogwash.”

Dumbledore kept pushing his version of the story. “Peter Pettigrew, suspected to be dead, was in fact the betrayer of the Potter Family and the one who staged his own death with the help of all those Muggles he killed at the time. He had been captured in a raid on his hiding location....”

That admission was strange enough that it actually encouraged a few of the reporters to engage their brains for a few moments and actually think. Some of them were pondering if this could be true or not.

“...In addition, the Death Eaters at Azkaban are now in a far more secure facility, but its location will have to remain undisclosed for the time being. And, as a final announcement, Tom Riddle, also known as the Dark Lord Voldemort, has finally been destroyed. He, too, used the horcrux magic to maintain himself after his mortal body was destroyed, but his horcrux vessel was discovered many years ago. He was destroyed by the Conqueror of Azkaban and Hogwarts...”

The newspaper was writing itself currently, Rita thought. “Ministry Withholds Truth: Azkaban Conquered and Destroyed.” “Peter Pettigrew Alive; Sirius Black Suspected Innocent.” “Final Proof Voldemort is Dead.” “Dumbledore’s Dark Secrets: Grindelwald’s Assassination” “Black Magic at Hogwarts: Dumbledore’s Reveals His Own Horcrux.” “Innocents Discovered in Azkaban.” “Conqueror Identity Remains Secret.”

Rita Skeeter asked the next question. “Why would the Ministry keep such things from the public?”

“You’ll have to ask the Minister of Magic. I believe it was his decision.”

Rita’s eyes glinted. “The Cowardice of Fudge: His Lies Through the Years.”

“Why are you explaining all of this? It has nothing to do with what happened at Hogwarts...”

Albus just glared. “The same person who took Azkaban took my former school. I think there’s a lot of similarity, actually. And, I am explaining about the innocents found in Azkaban because I am supposed to deliver an ultimatum in several parts.”

The reporters just gripped their quills tighter. They could begin to see the arc of this conference: shocking revelations followed by demands. The ‘Conqueror’ was some kind of terrorist. All of what he’d done was leading up to what he wanted from the transaction.

“The ultimatum is as follows: first, leave Hogwarts alone. Do not attempt to breach the newly improved wards as no one will like the

consequences. Second, do not attempt to rebuild the razed Azkaban. Find a new prison and construct it humanely. The Conqueror promises to raze the next one should it use dark creatures as guards. Third, reform and fix your own problems. You have a justice system that sends people to prison without trial. You have a Ministry so inept that it cannot keep a small force from overrunning its prison and destroying it. You have a Minister who refuses to tell the truth, even about critical matters of public security. Clean your own house.”

The reporters knew to start chiming in again. The warnings had been issued.

“The man’s a terrorist,” Rita shouted. “Why should we, or the Ministry, listen to anything he has to say?”

“It’s in your best interest, Rita. It’s your neck you’ll be saving if you do.”

Albus had never seemed so serious to Rita’s mind. She shivered a bit as she made notes in her shorthand.

“What about these wards around Hogwarts? What’s so special about them?”

“That I honestly don’t know. I understood the previous ones, but have no idea about what’s been erected in their place. However, I can feel their strength and their malign powers. I believe they’re capable of killing, but I have no direct knowledge of this.”

The reporters fell silent. All of them had attended this school in years past. It only seemed to sink in now that they would never be able to return. Their children, or grandchildren, would never be able to attend.

Mr. Lovegood recovered before any of the others. “What is this Conqueror going to do to encourage the Ministry to cooperate? It sounds like there’s some innocent people caught in all this...”

Albus smiled sadly. He nodded his head a few times, as well. “True, yes, very true. The five who were innocent and never received a trial have already been named to the Ministry. Full and complete pensieve

memories have been duplicated and sent with the other evidence. They have three days remaining to provide full and unconditional certification that the Ministry erred and these individuals are guilty of nothing. It is not a pardon the Conqueror desires for them; it is absolute acknowledgement that the Ministry was wrong... The Conqueror has demanded that each of them receive significant compensation for their false incarceration."

Mr. Lovegood continued on. "What happens if the Ministry doesn't act within three days?"

"Then the prisoners captured when Hogwarts was taken will not be returned to the wizarding world. And the Conqueror will take additional offensive actions to ensure compliance with his demands. He will not have innocents condemned without trials."

The bristling through the corps of reporters was all too visible. The hypocrisy of the statement was obvious: I proclaim these five innocent so fix your problem or else I will kill others to show you how powerful I am. It seemed a particularly bizarre form of self-blindness. This Conqueror was able to spot faults in others, but not in himself.

Albus raised his hand. "Hold on. The Conqueror has an offering to show his good will." Albus shot a spell out through the wards, aiming at a copse of trees a good thirty feet away from the front gate. "Those men and women were the guards on duty at Azkaban. The Conqueror returns them as a token of good faith. He will return the ones captured at Hogwarts, save for myself and Severus Snape, once the Ministry acknowledges its mistakes with the five innocents. And, as one final element, I am giving each of you a duplicated pensieve memory of Peter Pettigrew's confession under veritaserum. It should, perhaps, help smooth the way toward clearing Sirius Blacks' name..."

The questions raged then. Rita got in nearly the last one. "Why did he conquer Hogwarts?"

"I wish I knew, Ms. Skeeter. He hasn't seen fit to tell me."

“And why will you and Mr. Snape not be returning to the wizarding world?” That was from Mr. Lovegood.

“Mr. Snape has been classed among the Death Eaters, as he does indeed bear the Dark Mark. I, because of my horcrux, am not my own person any longer. My will belongs to the Conqueror. I must do his work, whatever it might be.”

More and more questions flew through the air, but Dumbledore sadly shook his head. “Our time here is done, I think. Report the truth of what you’ve seen today. And carefully review the veritaserum testimony from Peter Pettigrew. Do not get on the Conqueror’s bad side. You will rue the consequences with your dying breath.”

He turned around and the pensieve lifted up and levitated behind the man. And, in the fraction of a second before the wards triggered a massive illusion to mask the castle and the grounds, Rita Skeeter, among others, swore she saw a small black-haired boy smirking at her from just the other side of the gate. And that small child was riding atop a massive serpent.

“No, a trick of the light. Impossible.” She whispered to herself.

When she looked back to see if he was still there, all she saw were the massive ruins of a long destroyed castle. Even though she knew with her mind that it was an illusion, it was still quite a shock to her heart to see such a thing. Her school, in ruins. This was the illusion that Muggles saw when they ventured too near to Hogwarts. It was horrifyingly effective.

After staring dumbly for five minutes at it, she realized she had a lot of writing to do. And a lot of pseudonyms to manufacture. She decided, also, to heed Dumbledore’s warning about the truth. If she couldn’t be vicious about this Conqueror person, then it was at least open season on Cornelius Fudge.

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Rita spent most of the daylight hours writing nine stories. And the rest of the paper was turned over to this news conference, too. Sirius

Black's history was dug up and reexamined. Fudge's dealings at the Ministry were rehashed. A full history of Azkaban found its way into the pages, too.

This was all in compensation for still knowing next to nothing about how Hogwarts had been captured, save for the fact Dumbledore had participated.

It would take the Ministry admitting its mistakes to free the other Hogwarts teachers. And then they would be able to explain what had happened. Rita was very interested in that particular story.

However, when her stories were all filed, her mind turned toward being the first to flesh out the Hogwarts story. She stood up, grasped her handbag and quills, and almost ran out of the building. She apparated out of the office building and arrived just outside Hogsmeade. She made the transformation into her beetle form and flew towards the wards.

But she couldn't penetrate them. They were truly solid in some inexplicable way.

So, she decided to sit in hiding. She'd wait for someone coming along and try to hitch a ride. Rita had learned patience in her long years of chasing after worthy quarry.

It was a few hours after sunset when a single man walked the path between Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. He seemed old and somewhat frail, but Rita would not look askance at such a gift. She flew down from the branch of a bush and attached herself to the man's oversized robes.

She watched as the man finished his walk. He came to the outer gates. Then he set his hands on something outside the gates. It looked like nothing at all, but the way his hand shaped around the object there was clearly something there. Something that was plainly invisible. The man began to chant in a language Rita didn't understand.

But, she did feel the relaxation of the wards a few moments later. It was like the most carefree feeling in the world for a few moments. Then old man walked through the formerly inaccessible gates. And he just stopped.

A massive wave of power descended as the wards resealed themselves. And Rita found herself in a precarious position. She was no longer on the old man's robes. And she was no longer a beetle. Instead, she was lying haphazardly on the ground staring up at the night sky and the old man.

"Ah, I see he was only partially right. He was expecting more than one person to try to sneak in with me. But I thought no one would be so foolish. Did you not listen to Dumbledore's warning about the wards, Ms. Skeeter? They are more powerful than you know..."

"Who are you? What are you going to do to me," the vicious reporter pleaded.

The old man lifted back his hood. Rita recognized the face from somewhere. A chocolate frog card perhaps?

"Oh, good," the old man said after a moment of intense concentration. "He's on his way down. It seems that the Conqueror was expecting you..."

"You're not him," she said.

The old man shook his head. "No. Like Albus I was foolish in my youth. The Philosopher's Stone I am famous for creating isn't a lamp, nor is it Albus' sword, nor is it even a piece of alchemy. It is the disguising name of the horcrux I created five hundred eighty nine years ago – it grants immortality, but has none of the other properties I hinted at. No transmutation of gold, for example." The man gave a mock bow. "I am Nicholas Flamel, madam. And you have made a grave, grave mistake in coming here."

Part II: The Private Interview

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Rita found herself stunned, bound, and floating through the air. She was only conscious of her location – a dark room, probably within the castle – after someone woke and freed her.

A voice, young sounding, came from the shadows of the room.

“Do you have the ability to think anything through, Rita Skeeter? Or do you always swoop in without regard to the rules?” The voice chuckled lightly. “I guess we’ll find out starting tomorrow. You’ll have important work to do, Rita.”

The voice became increasingly distant. Finally, a door opened and a sliver of light flashed across the floor.

“One warning, this one you should follow. There are powerful wards preventing self-transfiguration. I wouldn’t try assuming your animagus form as long as you’re within the wards here. We wouldn’t want you ripping yourself to pieces accidentally, now would we?”

The voice went silent and the door seemed to close again.

But it was a very long time before Rita Skeeter managed to fall asleep in what she assumed was a prison cell of some sort.

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Rita woke early the next morning as the insistent sunlight seemed to be aimed at her head. She groaned and sat up. She saw she was still in her clothes and was tucked into an obviously transfigured bed. What surprised her was that she was in what she remembered was the potions classroom at Hogwarts.

Was it now a prison cell?

She stood up and began searching for her shoes and her wand. The shoes she found. But not the wand. It wasn’t terribly surprising. But

Rita was more than a little angry at herself for getting caught for the first time ever.

The door to the classroom opened and a house elf walked inside bearing a breakfast tray. The little thing bobbed and weaved so much it should have thrown half the tray's contents to the stone floor. But nothing was amiss when she finally grasped it and thanked the elf.

She ate quickly, not at all sure if or when she'd be able to eat again. She finished everything on the tray and felt more than a little full.

As she moved to set the tray on the floor, Albus Dumbledore walked into the room. "Ms. Skeeter, please come with me. You're wanted, it seems."

She stood up silently, leaving the tray on the floor, and walked behind Dumbledore as the pair swept back up through the dungeons. She could almost remember what it was like to be a student again, as Dumbledore had taught her transfiguration, of which she was a rather indifferent student.

After five minutes of silent travel, Dumbledore stopped before an innocuous door. He turned to face the reporter. "He'll be waiting inside for you. Keep your tongue in your head. Do not anger him. I fear you wouldn't enjoy the consequences."

Rita stood unmoving for nearly a minute, trying to calm and center herself. Then she reached out and grasped the door handle. She quietly unlatched it and tried to walk inside without making a sound. She wanted to see what she was walking into before she was seen.

But a small messy haired boy was smiling at her as she walked inside. He pointed wordlessly at a chair. Rita was unnerved. This child was the same one she swore she'd seen the prior day – riding on the back of a massive serpent.

After Rita sat down, the child opened his robes. He seemed to have a dozen or so odd pieces of wood arranged in a harness on his chest. He plucked one up, pointed it near to Rita, and hissed.

A massive wooden table appeared. It was conjuration unlike she'd ever seen. It wasn't Latin he'd used. It was hissing!

He pushed the odd stick – could she call the broken looking thing a wand? – back into his under-robe harness. Then he drug a chair over to the table he'd created.

“Good morning...”

That voice. It was the same as the terrifying child's voice she'd heard the night before.

“...I hope you slept well, Ms. Skeeter.”

“Best night of sleep I've ever had inside a prison before.”

The mirthless child smirked at her.

“Well, starting today I doubt you'll have much time for sleeping. I have a task for you. You may choose to accept or decline, of course. But, if you decline, I'm afraid you will not be leaving the castle...”

“You're a child, what could you do to me?”

“Madam, I am the Slytherin Childe. I am young and inexperienced now, just turned eleven, to be honest, but I have seen depredations that would make you ill; I have lived through strife and abuse no one should ever have to. I am battle hardened, more than a bit cruel, and I wield an army the likes of which no one has ever commanded before. It is immortal and unquestioning and completely brutal, should I wish it. Hope you never have to witness my fighters at work.”

Rita had to hold her tongue. This boy looked rather like a human-colored house elf. He was dressed in rags, more or less, and kept strange bits of wood clinging to his body. Plus he had a sack that he kept near to him. She could see the hilt of a sword poking out of it. He looked like someone who'd been living rough and had just managed to take over a castle.

But she'd been warned about him. She'd hold her acid tongue – and her judgment – for a bit longer.

“So... I did not have you killed outright for violating the warning because I have a use for you, Ms. Skeeter...”

She shivered a bit before inquiring. “What ‘use’?”

“You will be writing my official history. It will be a private volume, a single copy only. It will be part of what I leave behind, you understand...”

“I’m to be your biographer?”

The child inclined his head for a moment. “If you prefer that term, then yes.”

What eleven year old needs a biographer? And why her? Why now? She wanted to close her eyes and wake up from whatever alcohol-induced nightmare she was suffering.

She closed her eyes for a moment to consider her ‘options.’ There was only the one option as far as she could see: acquiescence.

Perhaps proximity to this little monster would give her leverage; perhaps it would make escaping a possibility. She nodded.

“One more warning, Ms. Skeeter. Anyone trying to leave the wards without permission is sent to a special holding cell. It’s a rather unpleasant place, you see, as it’s forty feet underneath the lake out front. And open to the elements. I’ll only have it checked for occupants once a week or so. So, you’d best watch yourself and keep your scheming to a minimum.”

The boy – this self-proclaimed Slytherin Childe – led her from the room. He apparently planned on a tour of the castle. A very odd tour.

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“Here is our first stop. Incidentally, much of what we see in here will form the basis for the early portions of the book you will be writing...”

The door was completely unremarkable, but still Rita was scared to pass inside.

The Slytherin Childe opened the door before Rita could move away. What she saw inside – the tableau present there – confused her and then terrified her.

There were three grayish statues resting on crude tables. And there was something long...slithering...a massive snake! There was a massive snake moving around slowly on the floor.

“What the hell is that?”

“Seruda, one of my basilisks...”

“BASILISKS!”

“Calm yourself, you’re with me. Seruda will not attack you – unless you deserve it, of course. Magical snakes have highly refined moral ethics. Kill for food; kill anyone who would kill you; petrify for pleasure. My own sense just happened to have evolved from theirs...and I am a bit more cruel.”

“More cruel than a basilisk?”

The Slytherin Childe just smirked.

“These figures on the tables are...or, rather, were my last remaining blood relatives. Vernon, Petunia, and Dudley Dursley...”

“They’ve been petrified; why would you do that to your own family?”

“If you’d listen, I’ll be glad to explain... I was two weeks away from my sixth birthday when Vernon there suddenly shoved me into the back of his Volvo. He drove for hours, then suddenly stopped near a small forest. I now know we were close to the Scottish border. He flung me

out and drove off. He expected me, at not even six years of age, to fend for myself...”

Rita was shocked at that kind of craven behavior. What would drive a man to do such a thing? Abandon a child...

But what child would be living with aunts and uncles instead of parents... An orphan. An obviously magical orphan living with Muggles. A powerful orphan. Aged eleven or so. Just the age of one Harry Potter...

She opened her mouth to exclaim, but his withering stare shut Rita up. “Took you long enough, I’d say. I expected you to be a bit swifter than that, actually.”

Rita just nodded, dumbly.

“They moved from their home in Surrey expecting to have seen the last of me. None of their neighbors knew anything about me, so they didn’t get into any kind of trouble for abandoning me. So, I went for them. It did take me three-plus years, but I caught up with them and had some friends of mine fetch them back. As repayment, you know, for all their years of kindness towards me.”

The boy looked positively feral in that moment.

“Anyway, I was abandoned near a forest. I walked inside and sat down. And I thought it was both cruel and a wonderful gift. As much as the Dursleys had hated me, I hated them. So, I was free to start over. Assuming I could manage to survive. And that’s when my first friend came upon me – actually she threatened to bite me...”

“What kind of friend would bite?”

“A magical smooth snake...”

“More snakes!”

“Of course, I’m a Parselmouth. I talk to snakes. They were my first friends, my first teachers, my first guardians. They introduced me to

magic; they explained that magic-speakers like myself needed magic sticks. They helped me select a slender oak branch and aided while I pushed two fangs from a dead ashwinder into the wood. I still use my first wand; powerful for elemental magic, especially fire, and also for anything wild, violent, and unpredictable. The smooth snakes cared for me until I met with an abandoned runespoor in the Forbidden Forest. He was the one who brought me into Hogwarts itself, into the Chamber of Secrets long hidden away, and introduced me to Serah the Ancient, my first true instructor in magic... The oldest basilisk currently living."

"You learned magic...from a basilisk?" Rita was torn between running and writing every detail down in her notebook. This was all fantastically rich. Her curiosity was overriding her fear for the time being.

"I learned human magic from a basilisk and I learned parsel magic, too. The snake magics are vastly different, though, meant for stealth, mind magics, and healing. The language is so old, a million years or more closer to when the magics of the world were former than Latin is, that even a boy of six can use the parselmagics, even when wizard magic remains out of reach. Snakes do not have offensive magics, save for the basilisk's killing gaze; that's why they generally crush and use venoms. I learned invisibility, runic ward construction, how to possess or hypnotize another, and the curing of poisons and healing of wounds before I was seven..."

Rita was trying to write everything down as quickly as she could. "Snakes can become invisible and create wards? I thought those were reserved to humans only..."

"Humans learned those tricks at the knees of snakes, Ms. Skeeter. And, those skills made it possible for the snakes to keep the Chamber of Secrets hidden from the outside world for a thousand years. Did you think a dead wizard's protections would keep such a thing hidden that long? No. No magic is permanent unless it is renewed from time to time. Wards weaken; enchantments fail. Magic will atrophy unless someone pays it due attention."

Skeeter is still writing when the Slytherin Childe drags her from the room.

“We have time enough only for an introduction today. I will leave you dozens of pensieve memories to review and incorporate in your writing.”

She gets a greedy look on her face. “Can I see what happened between you and Voldemort?”

Instead of an angry denial, the small boy offers her a brief nod. “It’s already bottled for your viewing. I figured it would be important to this story.”

Rita began to wonder how a child like this one knew so much about the world – and about his own legend. He was supposedly raised by snakes and muggles.

“All your questions will be answered, Ms. Skeeter. But in their proper order only.”

The Slytherin Childe – no, Harry Potter, Rita corrected herself mentally – pulled her into another room. This one had no basilisk guarding it. But it did seem to have some interesting treasures perched on a shelf.

“My first wizard teacher was an unusual choice.” Harry smiled at his little joke which Rita couldn’t yet understand. “Let me see if I can explain. Serah the Ancient took me in and I lived inside the Chamber of Secrets with her, along with some of the smooth snakes and runespoor. Salazar Slytherin, the man who made Serah, had also constructed a dwelling down there. And I could see it had had more recent occupants, too. Eventually I learned to read the snake language and began to read from a small shelf of books that had been concealed very well. I discovered what a horcrux was, how to find them, and how to make the creator of a horcrux follow my will. It just so happened that the first time I used the horcrux location spell, I discovered one poorly hidden inside the Chamber of Secrets itself. I picked it up, after studying Salazar’s book again, and beat it into submission. And that’s how I got my first wizard teacher...”

Harry pointed to a small golden cup. “That was one of Tom Riddle’s horcruxes, the one I discovered first. I used it to compel his roaming spirit to come back to me...”

“If a spirit is trapped inside an object like a genie in a lamp, as you say,” Rita said, “then how was this Riddle character’s floating around?”

“When one dies with a single horcrux in place, the dying portion of one’s soul does not perish or get to wander around – no, it joins with its brother fragment inside the horcrux. And there it waits for someone to come along and provide their body for a resuscitation. Or for that person to have a stronger soul and thus control the horcrux itself – to turn that trapped, twisted soul into a servant. But, there is a loophole, as there is in all of magic, if one possesses more than a single horcrux. If one dies with, say, six horcruxes, then that seventh portion of the soul, the darkest, foulest part, is allowed to freely move about. It’s tethered too lightly to any one of the six horcruxes so it is not reabsorbed.”

The young Harry looked ready to begin explaining more about how this Tom Riddle character became his teacher, when his face froze. His eyes closed and he seemed stuck in concentration for a good long minute.

“The Ministry didn’t listen. They’re attacking my wards as we speak. It seems they’re concentrating on the anti-floo and the ...”

And that was all Harry managed to say. A massive explosion from outside the castle threw Harry to the ground. Rita was a split-second behind him. The shelf of horcruxes released all its contents and the cup landed, painfully, on Rita’s head. Harry Potter, the Slytherin Childe, was back on his feet just a second later.

“I’ll kill them all. They attacked me. Me... Bomb from the north, attackers on the wards in every other direction. It was planned to weaken the wards, to bring them all down. Using potion bombs or muggle weapons. They’re all dead after the interrogation is over!”

He closed his eyes again. When he opened them he had a terrifying little smile on his face. Then he reached for the bag he carried with him. His hand went in and pulled out a massive sword. "Albus!"

Instead of a man, a spirit in the form of Albus Dumbledore floats into the room from a direction that meant he was outside when the blast occurred. "I was caught in it. I'm sorry. Mr. Filch and Professor Vector were helping me near the Quidditch pitch..."

"The blast got them, too?"

Albus nodded at Harry. He looked even angrier. Then he stooped down and rifled through his odd bag for a good long while. Within seconds of his starting, odd varieties of spirits began collecting inside the room. These weren't the ghosts Rita had remembered from her days as a student. They were something else – genies freed from their lamps.

"I've lowered the anti-floo ward. Take five of you and one of my basilisks and go to the lowest dungeon. I re-routed all floo arrivals there. Subdue everyone who comes through. No killing yet, not until we have full information." He turns to a vicious looking spirit. "You will go and copy the mind of the Minister of Magic. Duplicate all the paperwork. He has launched a war against me; well, every bureaucracy requires paperwork. Find it. We'll bury him in the truth before we dump his carcass in the earth." He turns to a female spirit, one that doesn't look particularly disturbing. "You will lead a team after the Minister's mind is copied. Let's send him a message. Kill all of his bodyguards and top advisors. Be sure the Minister is watching before you sever their heads from their bodies. Do not fail me, Spica Black."

He turned to point at Rita Skeeter.

"Rita, write a brief statement announcing the attack. Twelve at the gate, twenty-four from the forest, twelve on the lake. All captured. Plus the ones who floo in. Announce the deaths of three from the explosion. I doubt there will be much to return in the way of remains. You have one hour or we will add your name to the list of the victims killed in the blast."

Rita blanched and couldn't think to ask any questions before the young man was nearly at the door.

"I'm going to adjust the wards. It's time to take over the Forest. And I'll be adding the far more lethal wards to the mix. Everyone else, to the perimeter. I want them alive for now. One each to a cell. We'll have an interesting time interrogating them. Go. Now! They wanted a war. Well, they just got one."

Part III: The Ministry Attacks – and Harry Fights Back

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter pushed his way deep into the bowels of the school. He walked past where Godric Gryffindor had created his private dueling chamber, his secret library (although the man had obviously not been much of a reader given the paucity of titles and the small number of shelves still visible), and his bed chambers.

He walked on the underground path, seventy feet below the earth, that corresponded with the ward lines the Founders of Hogwarts had created ten centuries earlier. He was on familiar ground again. He, along with Serah the Ancient, had explored all these tunnels many times over the years. Just a few days earlier, in the early morning before he'd 'conquered' Hogwarts, he'd improved all the wards to the point where next to nothing could penetrate. Nothing, excepting for pure energy...those bastards!

"Bombs! It has to be Muggle bombs."

Harry was still incredulous. No potions could achieve that kind of damage; not unless they'd been brewed up by the bathtub-full. Bringing bombs – Muggle bombs – into this called for severe reprisals. These Muggles, along with the Ministry, would learn why interference was a bad policy.

Harry fumed as he thought over his longer range plans. Serah always hissed that he should plan three times before even taking a single breath in an unfamiliar location. Setting up a war was far different from walking into an unknown room...

"Bah!"

A massive rune stone floated behind him as his mind twisted and turned through the complications and options. It was one of the four dozen warehoused, unused rune stones from the original construction of Hogwarts. He'd found them years earlier in a partially concealed corridor near to where Godric Gryffindor had built his rooms. Even though they hadn't been put to use, they'd been soaking

up ambient magic for a millennium. They were enormously powerful magical items.

He walked quickly until he came to a niche that had long before been created in the tunnel wall. He carefully placed the runestone into the space that had been left for this 'last resort' style rune. Once Harry turned a rune stone on in this location, according to the original warding plans, the entire Forbidden Forest would come under the jurisdiction of Hogwarts' own wards, plus any other schema meant just for the Forest.

He carefully inscribed in his own blood the first set of wards he wanted erected around the Forbidden Forest. He didn't have time to put the whole set into action – he was supposed to be fending off a Ministry attack right now – but he got the most important ones into effect.

Blood wards were powerful magic. Harry was now the only one who could ever bring them down. The Founders had erected the earliest of their wards in similar ways, but they hadn't been as cunning or as absolute.

Outside in the Forbidden Forest, every single human present, all of them employees of the Ministry, fell insensate to the ground. Humans of every sort – wizards, squibs, and Muggles – would not be able to walk about in the Forest any longer. At least until Harry put in the more nuanced components to the wards.

Harry turned around when he heard something coming from behind. He smelled the air. It was Serah. She was coming to check up on her pupil, it seemed.

"The wizards are stupid," she hissed.

"Had you any doubts?"

"Only on the timing, my youngling. Stupid or cruel people always demonstrate the depths of their stupidity and cruelty; they can't help themselves." She sampled the air in the corridor. Serah was perhaps

more paranoid than Harry was. “Did you put on a show for your vile-writer?”

Harry smiled and nodded. “She’ll do. She was dumb enough to cross the wards, or try, after being warned. She’ll serve her purpose just fine...”

“And after?”

“We’ll see,” Harry said. “I think her fear has conquered her other instincts for the time being. Hopefully it will be enough to keep her in line. I don’t have time to babysit – or to have you or one of my other snake-friends do that task...”

“I’d rather bite her than watch her...”

“I think I would prefer it, too. But the book she’ll write is necessary before we begin the other work.”

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Cornelius Fudge was sitting with baited breath in the well-hidden lower level of the Department of Mysteries, the never-discussed Operations Section. He himself had only visited the place four times in his tenure. It wasn’t something people talked about, thought of, or even imagined. Fudge himself had been forced to learn Occlumency after his election before he could be informed of the section’s existence or updated on any of its projects and plans.

As the muggles say, an old dog don’t like to learn new tricks, especially Mind Magics. So true, Fudge remembered his nearly impossible struggles... Not that he considered himself old or a canine or anything. The general sentiment was appropriate, however.

But today Fudge was thinking about the Operations Section and the lower level of the Department of Mysteries. Today that secret portion of the Ministry was the center of the Reclaim Hogwarts operation. The top twenty operators had been mixed in with other skilled cursebreakers and Aurors – all under the most strenuous of secrecy oaths – and the head of the Operations Section was leading the

operation from the command post in Hogsmeade. Fudge was with everyone else in the Section – observing, noting, and trying to spot failures or problems as they came along.

So far it was absolutely textbook. Cursebreakers from three directions throwing everything they had against the wards – then the release of the eight Muggle bums, or was it boombs? – from the north. The shockwave of energy had certainly been enough to knock down the anti-Floo wards and who knew what else it might have taken down from that nasty cocktail of wards...

Then the search and destroy team floo'd in from Hogsmeade. The top Aurors and the cloaked Unspeakables. It'd be an utter bloodbath. A pity if Albus and the other teachers had to die to reclaim the old school – but doing nothing was earning Fudge record low approval ratings in the polls. Nothing was worse than low numbers, even spilling some innocent blood.

Besides, that Dumbledore fellow finally owned up to the fact he wasn't so lily white, didn't he? Ha! A horcrux. At least Dumbledore had fallen more in the public's regard than Fudge had. Ha!

Fudge leaned back to enjoy the battle. He was secure in the knowledge he was solving the problem.

However, many floors upstairs, Cornelius Fudge's life was becoming infinitely harder. The horcrux spirit of Hannibal Lestrangle was currently passing through Cornelius' most secure wards surrounding the small room where his most secret files were hidden away from prying eyes.

But no wards could stop a spirit, not one as powerful as Hannibal Lestrangle.

Within ten minutes, he'd duplicated everything Fudge considered worthy of his top level of secrecy. The single copy of a report issued after the razing of Azkaban: the one that said there was a ninety-five percent chance that Sirius Black was actually innocent of any crimes. The one that Cornelius had tried to destroy over and over again, only the magically imbued parchment keeping it intact. The report, of

which Cornelius said, “if I can’t destroy it, then certainly I can bury it.” The report Cornelius has scrawled his signature over and stamped “Official Secrets Act: Most Vitally Secret.”

There was nearly two hundred kilos of similar material. The man was dumb enough to keep running logs of who paid him bribes as well. What kind of a midget-brained politician did such things? In Hannibal Lestrangle’s day, this sad excuse for a Hufflepuff would have been devoured by more powerful forces within two hours of setting foot inside the Ministry.

Hannibal continued his search. The Minister’s briefcase held a few interesting tidbits as did his locked desk drawers. Then Hannibal searched the papers and possessions of the staff in the Minister’s outer office. More gold!

The man should know better than to write such incendiary plans down. An entire copy of his plan for sacking Hogwarts was sitting on the desk of one Dolores Umbridge, the newest member of the Minister’s staff. Stupid, very stupid.

Hannibal read the document closely and realized that his Master was going to be very angry very soon. All the people who inhabited these offices were already marked for death, but how many others would now join them?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Kingsley Shacklebolt was finishing his fourteenth year as an Auror, but only his third year as a veteran of the Operations Section – so he was also the guinea pig sent through the Floo first into Hogwarts.

He landed with a thump and found himself sprawled out on a dusty stone floor. This clearly wasn’t the Hogwarts Headmaster’s office.

He stood up and threw some Floo powder into the fireplace. “Three Broomsticks,” he shouted. It was all too clear something had gone wrong. And in an operation like this one, one thing going wrong usually meant a lot more would be going wrong very shortly.

The fireplace flashed. Kingsley tried to step through only to be thrown back to the floor as another body landed on top of his.

“Shit,” the Afro-Caribbean Auror said. “Use the Messaging Spell. Stop them from coming through. It’s some kind of one-way trap...”

Here, a third person came through the Floo. And then, in rapid order, four more. Kingsley felt the pain when his thigh bone broke under the strain.

“Ahh! You’re breaking my bones, you assholes.”

Kingsley used his powerful upper arms to push himself away from being underneath the human pile.

Thankfully, that was just in time. Alastor Moody came through and his ridiculous peg leg would have impaled Kingsley had he still been lying in his original spot.

“Constant vigil—”

But Moody didn’t get the finish his thought. He petrified right in front of Kingsley’s face.

“What? How?”

That was when Kingsley heard sounds behind him. He turned, and stopped himself from completing the turn. There was a great snake there, a basilisk. And the Hogwarts ghosts, too. What was this place?

The ghosts began attacking – with magic. Stunners, pain hexes, the whole works. Because of the way that they were jumbled on the floor, it was like clubbing sleepy kittens. Kingsley was one of the last to succumb. His last conscious thought was, “At least I’m not petrified like Moody was.”

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Fudge was pacing now. The team inside Hogwarts hadn't reported in. Nor the one in the Forest. And the one at the gate seemed to be under attack. And they couldn't apparate out.

"What's going on," Fudge bellowed.

"They didn't seem to be fazed by what we did," came the voice of the chief of operations.

"But the wards came down..."

"It looks like they brought down specific wards. We attacked so they attacked back. It's a loss, I think. You'll need to get your negotiating hat on, I suspect..."

Fudge shouted out more questions and got unpleasant, but true, answers back. "You're fired," he shouted.

The chief of operations laughed. "You might be the Minister of Magic, Fudge, but you don't have the power to fire me."

"Well then, who does?"

The laughter resumed. "No one who respects you."

At that, Fudge gathered his belongings and stormed out of the room. He linked up with his four bodyguards outside the upper level of the Department of Mysteries. "Where's Petrus, Dolores, and the others?"

"In conference room Alpha, Minister."

So that's where Fudge went.

As Cornelius Fudge stepped across the threshold, he saw some fairly remarkable, and infinitely disturbing, things. For one, Dolores Umbridge stood up from her seat, although it was hard to notice the shift in height, and then her head promptly fell off her body. Cornelius began shrieking like a girl. And when his other three top staffers moved to help him and the dead Dolores, they seemed to lose their heads as well.

“What in the name of Merlin’s golden tresses is going on?” Fudge made less sense shouting than he normally did.

Fudge turned around looking for whoever was doing this horrible desecration of his personal staff. He looked pleadingly to his lead bodyguard, Dawlish, for assistance. That’s when his entire team of body guards also seemed to lose their heads.

Fudge had enough.

He fainted dead away and hit his head on the corner of the conference table. It would be some hours before he was missed or discovered. Luckily, his head wound stopped bleeding before then. He was the only one of the nine occupants of the room to survive – and only then barely.

“I tell you, there were ten men – no, a dozen burly assassins – lying in wait in that room. They killed everyone before I could even get my wand out, you see...”

Fudge was a politician, and thus, an accomplished liar, but no one who heard his tale was quite sure what to believe that day. It could be true, after all, and there were eight dead. No one other than Fudge had seen these ten, no, dozen assassins. But no one quite absolved Fudge for what happened...and for surviving it.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry spent twenty minutes examining the documented plan of the attack before he began to swear again. “They actually approached the Muggle Prime Minister about using nuclear weapons against us. At least someone in government is smart enough to say ‘no’ from time to time. The Muggles have earned a partial reprieve, then, for being smarter than their wizarding counterparts.”

It was enough.

He walked into the small dusty room and awakened one of the captured attackers. “You were one of the ones captured at Azkaban, weren’t you? Their top ward specialist, right?”

The man just scowled. But it was true enough.

“Do you know that we punched through your precious wards in less than three minutes? And, even then, your team of guards and Aurors wasn’t able to do a thing to stop us. Embarrassing, isn’t it?”

The rest of the interrogation went the same way. This one refused to answer Harry’s questions. Harry tried, he really did. Five whole, unanswered questions. Harry lost his patience.

So Harry fed him – one who had been personally warned about never returning to Hogwarts, on pain of severest punishment – to Serah the Ancient. She hadn’t eaten in two years and she was much happier after a plump, fattened meal.

“Raw and wiggling is really the best way,” she hissed. “And the bones add a nice crunch.” Harry gladly translated for the rest of the restrained audience.

After that, the other Aurors and Unspeakables were quite a bit more willing to cooperate.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter washed and fixed his clothing before he returned to find Rita Skeeter. She had completed the press release. It was appropriate and based on facts – hardly the stuff that had made Rita famous, but just the needed thing.

He had the horcrux spirit of Albus Dumbledore begin the process of disseminating it throughout Britain and the world. He still had to decide what to do with the volumes of material that Hannibal Lestrage had brought back. He had to clear the innocent, then punish the rest of the morons at the Ministry.

So many paths, so many delights possible, so little time.

When Rita looked with terrified eyes at Harry and began to fling out questions, Harry sighed. He plucked his cherry wood and griffon feather wand out and said, "Obliviate," while concentrating very clearly on Rita's scattered mind. Specifically on what he wanted removed from that mind.

A few moments later she looked rather glassy eyed and was no longer in the middle of a nervous breakdown. Harry gave her a few moments to return to her right mind.

"Now, as I was saying Rita, my first teacher was a spirit named Tom Riddle. He'd been a student here at Hogwarts, was gifted in Potions and Defense and quite a few other disciplines, including the Mind Arts, but he'd been stupid enough to leave one of his horcruxes out where I could find it. Well, that was after I'd found Salazar's book that discussed the various paths to immortality; he was quite sharp about the methods for detecting them and the numerous downsides to constructing them..."

Part IV: The Teaching of Tom Riddle

A/N: Thanks to Prof. H. J. Potter for the reminder that he enjoys the story. I haven't been too enthused with writing since reading Book 7...

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter, the one who would be known only as the Slytherin Childe world-over within a few short weeks, was filling Rita Skeeter's mind, and notepads, with as much information as he could, as quickly as he could.

"...he was, of course, rather displeased at finding himself compelled to do as I told him. That's when he remembered the old Muggle fairy tales about genies. He was the only one who told me I could have but three wishes..."

Rita Skeeter just wrote everything down. In her mind, she was trying to understand all of it. Lord Voldemort – and a thousand year old basilisk – had been this young child's teachers? Holy Merlin, what a terror he was...what a terror he would be for a very long time.

"...so I used his horcrux to banish him temporarily and spent several days talking with Serah the Ancient about how to phrase my wishes. I would play by this Riddle's game – this was before, of course, I had him teach me history and discovered he was the one responsible for my parents' deaths – and, by playing well, beat him. Serah only got to be as old as she was by being as cunning and crafty as she was; an excellent logician, I'd have to say. So my first wish was simply 'I command you to teach me everything you know.'"

Rita wrote that down and underlined it twice. It was rather crafty – and an excellent way to get an almost unlimited number of wishes based upon just a single one.

Harry continued on with his story while Rita continued to ponder the whole scenario. A six year old boy besting Lord Voldemort in a competition of wits – and by listening to a snake. So, if this Slytherin

Childe could do such a thing, why hadn't the other Parseltongue done the same?

"Hold up, there. Why didn't this Tom Riddle listen to the basilisk? Why didn't he ask it for help? And, if what you're telling me is true, when he was a student here, it sounds like he found this basilisk and used it to attack people. I remember that Myrtle Pritchard died the year before I started Hogwarts, actually..."

Harry smiled. "What were his words when I asked him the same question? 'I would never learn from a snake! I'm a wizard. I told the bloody beast what to do and ignored everything else, of course...' Later on he learned better with his serpent called Nagini, but by then the basilisk was out of his reach. She's the reason why he wanted to come back and 'teach' at Hogwarts actually – or, at least, that's what he told me."

Rita blinked a couple of times. She felt like her mind was trying to swim through treacle. It just couldn't operate at the speed it normally did. It was all so amazing – and she hadn't been able to use an ounce of invective yet.

"How did you know to do all this? Find this dark artifact? Summon up this ghostly Lord Voldemort?"

Harry frowned a bit here. "I told you. Serah worked with me first after I arrived. Then I discovered the hidden books, which taught me about horcruxes among other things, and I used that knowledge to discover my newest and perhaps most reluctant teacher, Tom Riddle. It's very important that you get all these details correct, Rita. Very important."

From the cold tone of his voice, Rita was very sure about what was important.

"But, I need to understand all this. How can you, at age eleven, command all these spirits? And Dumbledore? And Flamel?"

"And Horace Slughorn and Perenelle Flamel and Bu Li Qin and Ali bin Nebuchadnezzar; or how about Morgana and Merlin, you might know them better by their current names of Gwenog Jones and

Persimmon Ollivander, vicious pair of time travelers if you ask me... Fine, if you're so curious about the horcruxes, we'll satisfy that first. But you will have to understand about Tom Riddle and what he taught me. It's vital for the book you're writing..."

Before Rita could inquire any further, Harry was leading Rita on a merry chase through the castle. Up, up they went. Finally the boy stopped in front of a stone gargoyle – the one that protected the Headmaster's office – and he hissed out a password. The gargoyle leapt aside.

Harry walked up the moving revolving staircase and was into the inner chamber before Rita even thought to move. She was surprised beyond movement, beyond questioning.

"This is the temporary home for my most valuable possessions. I keep most of the horcruxes near me at all times, should I need my minions to do my bidding. But, in here, specially warded, I keep the unique volumes I've come across in my horcrux hunting. You see, most people do not just bury their horcrux in a hole in the ground. No, they stash it in a hidden vault or another place of significance. And they keep other valuables there, too. For me, what can be more valuable than knowledge?"

Rita made it to the top of the stairs by the time Harry finished speaking. The view she took in was beyond comprehension. The desk and headmaster portraits were gone; everything she remembered from her days as a student under Dippet and then Dumbledore, it was all different now.

There were three glass cases in the center of the room. And two monstrous basilisks curled up asleep outside the protective wards.

Harry, the young child, walked to the wards enclosing the cases and hissed for a few moments. The wards flickered and then went out.

"I store a collection of the memories of Salazar Slytherin on the lowest shelf, very informative. I didn't learn what a pensieve was until last year, otherwise he could have been my first wizarding teacher. It's a shame more witches and wizards have not thought to store their

achievements this way. So much knowledge lost every decade; so very little of it ever recovered. And with intellectual stagnation the way it is in this backward country, well, they can use any help they can get...”

From here, Harry explained the other volumes. “The Potter Family Grimoire, which the goblins parted with under great duress, contains magic that I can’t yet perform for the most part. My core isn’t yet stable enough, you see. I can cast fire spells with my fire wand and basic memory charms with my mind arts wand, but I can’t make much use of the harder spells, you see. That’s why I’ve spent so much time on runic wards...”

Rita looked the volume over when it was handed to her. It was a remarkable piece of work. It was the equivalent of shelves of lesser works on healing, warding (including how the Potter Estates are traditionally warded), defensive magic, stealth magics, theories of spell crafting, the educational plan for a Potter child, and heavy duty offensive magics – all the stuff devised and kept in secret for other Potters to use. It detailed the Potter history, their foundation as solid tradesmen who later branched into spell crafting and more mercenary pursuits. For hundreds of years, contrary to their present reputation, they were gray wizards who track down criminals for bounties, all the while developing spells to make their family craft easier. They’d only been light affiliated for the last hundred years.

Harry had moved on to explain many of the other volumes. “These are the ‘lost’ grimoires of other families, mostly extinguished lines. I found them near to where I found horcruxes, you understand. Some powerful magics inside them, some I can already attempt, but nothing as comprehensive or impressive as my family’s work...”

Rita tried reaching out for one particularly old volume, but Harry slapped her hand away.

“That one you may not touch. It was one of Merlin’s three horcruxes. This work diary, the Codex Avalonia it’s referred to as today, but it will possess you unless your soul and mind are strong enough to overcome it. I don’t think you’d last a second, Rita...”

“What’d he work on?”

“That? I have several of his work journals, but that one is mostly on time magic and his theories on animagery. He did much of the foundational work on human to animal transfiguration, so it was nice to see his thoughts on self transfiguration as well... Serah the Ancient was most impressed when I read the book to her. She’s really quite smart...”

The boy was so casual with the things he said. The marvels of ‘lost’ magic he’d rediscovered because of his horcrux hunt, staggering.

“However, to answer your question about how I managed to capture the horcrux of Tom Riddle, I need to read a bit from one of these books.” He was crouched down near a lower shelf with a row of identically shaped and colored black journals. “Salazar Slytherin didn’t go chronologically. He stored his thoughts by topic. Tremendously organized man... He wrote a few volumes on various dark arts and parsel magics he experimented in. He was the first to master animal-based inferi, if I read his notes correctly. He did quite a bit in the black arts, as well, the truly vile stuff such as horcrux creation. But he never made one himself.” He looked at the shelf a moment longer. “Here we are. ‘Explorations in Immortality.’”

He plucked the volume from the shelf and then began to flip through its pages. Finally Harry stopped and began to read out loud.

“The Horcrux has one major flaw which explains why the practice has fallen out of use in recent centuries. It is well known that anyone who captures your Horcrux, if strong enough to best your will, can command you until the end of days. It matters not whether you be embodied or in spirit form. (Alternately, if someone captures your Horcrux and loses the battle of will, you may permanently possess that person – or use their life magics to recreate your old body magically. That is what everyone remembers about them, not the downside, not the possibility of losing a battle of will. Be warned!)

“It is obvious that the tales from ancient Persia of the djinn are actually concerning witches and wizards who have discovered a Horcrux. Thus, if your Horcrux falls into your enemy’s hand, he

may command you, your magic, and everything about you until your enemy chooses to release you. More than one dark spirit has fallen to the will of a stronger witch or wizard because of a poorly hidden Horcrux. Secrecy only goes so far; goblins can be bribed; family members can betray one another; it's a very risky proposition.

“A Horcrux is also only nearly impervious to destruction. Much as it requires a coldblooded murder to create one, it requires the willing sacrifice of a life to destroy one. One who is dying already may also destroy a Horcrux. The second major problem with Horcrux magic is that one who has destroyed a single Horcrux – and somehow survived the experience – may then destroy any other Horcrux. There have been three reported ‘horcrux hunters’ in the last millennium. Little is known of their identities or their level of success in seizing and destroying horcruxes. On the following pages, I list the spells taught me concerning the locating of powerful soul magics such as the horcrux. It is possible one or more of these ‘horcrux hunters’ was initially responsible for the development of these spells.”

Rita was writing furiously. She'd have to get a hold of a pensieve so she could accurately transcribe all this. She felt like she'd learned more today – albeit, of dark and cruel magics – than she had in a single year at Hogwarts in all her subjects. Being forced to understand by someone who could crush her was quite a motivating factor.

“I hope you understand finally... I used these spells to locate Riddle's horcrux and then I bested him in a battle of will; Slytherin's journal was quite helpful on techniques for winning actually. Now, back to Mr. Riddle and my education...”

Harry was meticulous in describing his tuition: the languages, history, theories of magic he learned; the dark, light, and black magic he studied but was, because of his young age, unable to practice; enchanting of objects, strategy and plotting, and “the name of every Death Eater and supporter this Lord Voldemort had. And his amusement at the imprisonment of a few who hadn't worked for him...”

Harry took her on another jaunt through the school. “Well, I fixed that problem. In this room we have Lucius Malfoy, assassin of countless Muggles, Bellatrix Lestrange, most feared among the Death Eaters, Severus Snape, spy to both sides in the war, Augustus...”

Rita dropped her quill as she looked at the odd sight. It was like a Muggle wax museum, but all of these witches and wizards were real. Real but petrified. This was how Harry Potter stored his prisoners. They’d never be able to escape, not ever.

“And we put a special something into the wards. Anyone carrying in a mandrake or a potion with mandragora in it finds it transformed into an explosive solution. Boom! No more problems with trying to break out my prisoners, you understand.”

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The army of horcrux spirits – the cursed djinn – were off on their scheduled tasks. Their master had planned to wait longer before enacting this portion of his plan. However, the use of Muggle bombs at Hogwarts sufficiently annoyed him to start everything earlier.

One contingent of spirits set to cursing the waters flowing in the Thames. It wasn’t enough to have the water turn red – Muggles could do that with their dyes – but to turn it into blood: plasma, red cells, white cells, and platelets. Fish and refuse began swimming inside real blood. The contingent even set long lasting charms upon nearby rocks and fences to keep the new water continually transfigured. It took them hours to move the entire length of the Thames to keep performing the spells. But the screams of horror coming from the Muggles nearby were very satisfying.

A smaller contingent made its way into Surrey and began transfiguring hundreds and hundreds of frogs , thousands by the hour. They wanted the place so thick in amphibians that they didn’t stop until well past darkness set. The screams here, too, were satisfying.

A large contingent worked its way through Wales casting the Furnunculus Jinx and many other boil-inducing spells at everyone they could find. Up in Argyllshire and Fife, another team was filling

the skies with biting flies and gnats, enormous black clouds of them. In Warwickshire, a small team used rotting curses to attack every cow, goat, and sheep they could find. In one afternoon, the entire agricultural production of milk, meat, and cheese was destroyed. And every other part of the United Kingdom felt the desperate licks of thunder, lightning, and hail in the middle of a sunny sky.

The horcrux spirits enjoyed this sort of work. They'd all been dark enough to enjoy causing pain – and they'd all been confined within their horcruxes long enough that they were willing to do anything that would earn them temporary freedom from their imprisonment.

It was a brilliant plan, they said to one another. The master knew what he was doing. Having lived with Muggles for a few years, he remembered how superstitious the lot of them were. So their Master selected actions from their shared religious mythology to confuse and terrify them: the ten plagues of Egypt.

Tomorrow they'd randomly select new locations and plagues to match up. Perhaps the firstborn sons would die tomorrow in this town or that, or maybe an entire county would be hit...

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

“...that's all you can absorb for now, Rita. Organize your notes and begin to write. I've left you a dozen vials of memories. Incorporate them into your book somehow. We still have much to discuss.”

He locked her inside her room.

She looked at her bulging notebook. She'd have to get another one soon. She also had to develop a plan for smuggling out her notes. She'd never be allowed to keep her finished product, but the notes were just as valuable.

The things she'd seen. The things she'd learned. Rita could be wealthy for the rest of her life just on a few tidbits... But how to do it and survive it?

She began organizing her notes. Rita had some sort of 'book' to write and not a lot of time to do it.

She put quill to parchment and began.

"Harry Potter is the Slytherin Childe. At fifteen months of age, he defeated the Dark Lord Voldemort. At eleven years of age, he conquered Hogwarts Castle and made it his own home and base. It is the years and events between these two that bear deep scrutiny... This reporter has been given unprecedented access to Harry Potter, Slytherin Childe, through a number of exclusive interviews."

Part V: The Other Minister

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

John Major, just beginning what would be nearly a seven year term of office as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, found he'd fallen asleep at his desk, yet again. He yawned and cracked his neck and made to stand up. The briefing documents were an utter bore. And the appointments documents that needed signing could wait until tomorrow. And the issues he really needed to address, well, he didn't have a clue where to start with them.

When he stood up, though, he found himself looking into the eyes of a child. A child who wore a bloody great snake around his neck.

Surprised beyond all measure, John Major flopped back down into his seat.

The boy plucked a couple of documents off the Prime Minister's desk. Memos detailing the strange occurrences of the last few days. All the ducks and sheep dying in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex yesterday. Lakes, streams, and ponds turning blood red in Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, and Dorset – in addition to the Thames still being polluted after nearly a week. More boils appearing on everyone in Sutherland and Caithness. The bizarre infestation of frogs in Cheshire, Lancashire, and Yorkshire. The deaths of the firstborn sons in Orkney and Shetland. The Archbishop of Canterbury trying to proclaim that the ancient plagues of Egypt hadn't suddenly reappeared on British soil. A dozen newspaper clippings laughing at the Archbishop – and wondering what in the bloody world was going on.

"I see you've been getting my messages," the boy said in a quiet voice.

"Your messages?"

The boy smiled and nodded. "I hope it's scary enough..."

“I’ve got looting in London, Manchester, Aberdeen, and two dozen other cities. I’ve got Biblical maniacs preaching Armageddon. And how in the blazes did you get in here, past all my security...”

The child with the snake drew out a slim wooden stick. “Oh, you’re one of those. I’ve only ever met Fudge before... So, this is all your doing?” He kept his calmness wrapped around him as he began planning how to extract himself from this situation. The boy didn’t seem like the assassin sort, they just started blasting away.

“It’s actually your doing, Mister Major, to a great extent. You gave the wizards access to several of your stronger explosive munitions...”

“I most certainly did not.”

He was pressing the buttons underneath his desk to signal his security team to come in and aid him. He was doing everything to keep this terrifying little child talking. He wasn’t an assassin but he still might start blasting away with his little wooden stick – the child with a snake wrapped around him seemed to have a loose relationship with reality. Wizards. The word made John Major shiver a bit; he was still angry that Baroness Thatcher hadn’t seen fit to inform him. Bah! Wizards. He’d met that bizarre little man Fudge, but obviously this child was something different entirely.

“You did, Mister Major. You authorized your Ministry of Defence to give Fudge and his people some bombs. I have a document with your signature on it.” The boy pushed the paper across the table. John Major examined it. It was genuine, it seemed, although he didn’t remember signing something like it.

“I don’t remember...”

“I’m sure you don’t. Maybe they took over your mind and made you do it; or perhaps they convinced you to do it then cleared your mind afterwards...”

“Your kind, you can do those things?”

The Prime Minister kept tapping away at the button. He was feeling fear, debilitating fear, in every ounce of his body.

“They’re not coming for you, Mister Major. Everyone in the building is asleep, even you were until I woke you. In addition, no electronic signals can pass into or out of this place as long as I’m here. So, you’re stuck with me until I’m finished with our conversation.”

The Prime Minister almost slumped back in his seat.

“What do you want? You’ve obviously got me as a hostage for some reason...”

“No, you’re not a hostage. You’re a participant in a peace conference.”

“Peace...”

“Maybe preemptive peace conference is the more correct term, as we’re not yet at war. Although you’ll find that the civilians and generals who cooperated with the wizards in supplying those bombs have all had terrible, fatal accidents earlier this evening. You’ll need to find a slew of new junior ministers for the Ministry of Defence, I’m afraid, but it’s rather the least of your problems, I’d say...”

The Prime Minister just cradled his head in his hands.

“Here is one option. You tell your people that they have forty days to evacuate the British Isles otherwise they will all die horrible, painful deaths. Point to the blood-filled river and ponds, point to the masses of frogs, flies, and dead livestock. Your end here is coming, Mister Major. The end of all humans, magical or otherwise.”

The Prime Minister spluttered.

“Or, option two. You can hide the truth from your people or try to fight me in the time I’ve given you. Then, when forty days have passed, you will witness a wholesale slaughter of everyone you ever once ruled.”

“Bullets can kill you, boy,” the Prime Minister slung back.

“Bullets, radiation, chemical weapons – none of this can stop my army, Mister Major. You’re a fool if you think so, but I’d be glad to demonstrate. Give me the name of a town here that you dislike and I’ll make it and its inhabitants disappear by the morning, if you’d like.”

The older man swallowed even though his throat felt parched and itchy. He could feel his mind and body aging.

“Why? This seems extreme – cruel beyond imagination...”

“I’ve been betrayed by your kind too many times, Mister Major. I was abandoned before I was six years of age. I beg you not to try the pity card with me. And, as for wizards, they abandoned me with your kind. Their wars made me an orphan, too. The only ones to ever help me out were my friends, my colleagues, the serpents of Great Britain. I’ll turn this island into the greatest preserve ever seen, for them, for all animals...and for myself.”

The boy, the one with a strange looking snake wrapped around his shoulders, was absolutely insane. Evicting a country full of people, nearly sixty million people, to turn an island into a nature preserve. Ludicrous. Impossible. Political suicide even.

“I don’t think the British people would take to being dislocated en masse like that. It’s just not feasible...”

“Politicians are only kept around to make impossible things possible – and even then most of them fail at it. So, don’t fail at this, Mister Major. The consequences will be real and very brutal. Do I need to make a demonstration?”

The Prime Minister just sadly swung his head from side to side. He was trying to think of compromises he could suggest – anything short of trying to abandon his country.

“Why can’t you just expel the witches and wizards, the ones who wronged you...”

“I am expelling them, along with you. Equal treatment for all. Think of it this way: This is a gift from me to you, the gift of forewarning. You and your people refused to hand over a nuclear weapon to the wizards who wanted one, instead giving them eight conventional bombs. You helped them attack me – and anger me – but you did not let them destroy me and irradiate half of the United Kingdom. For that small act of intelligence, I am telling you my plans instead of just destroying all of you without warning as I had planned. You see, I can be a merciful sort when the mood strikes...”

The Prime Minister had no idea how this sort of treatment could be considered merciful.

“You’re here for a reason, child. I think it’s not to deliver an ultimatum. I think you want another alternative, a way to talk yourself from this course. We can negotiate. We can find you something you want, if you truly do command the kind of army you claim...”

“Feel free to talk yourself into believing all this. I came only because it struck me as slightly more honest to give you and everyone else a fighting chance. In the event you do not take my generous offer, I wanted to see the whites of my enemy’s eyes before I’m forced to kill you. I’ll remember your face this way...”

The Prime Minister had no doubts that the boy meant every word. He was the leader of sixty million people, though, so he plunged forward. There was a way to salvage this. He’d been in Parliament through much of the worst of the Irish Republican Army. There was a way through this impending disaster, too.

“What do I call you?”

“You may call me the Slytherin Childe.”

Harry just stood there, stroking the ridge behind his snake’s head, smiling. He knew he was going to win, no matter what John Major managed to do or say.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Rita was cowering on the floor of the former Potions laboratory. The Great Purge had just begun. She'd just heard the Hogwarts ghosts discussing it. She clutched her piles of parchment to her and tried to keep on writing. However, her quill wasn't cooperating well because of all her involuntary shaking.

She expected more muggle bombs any moment. They'd last tried bombing four days ago. The earth had shook like she'd never felt before, but no energy had penetrated the wards.

From what she'd heard through various sources she'd cultivated from inside the castle – okay, it was house elves who were still out and about in the world – millions of muggles had left, but even more millions had remained behind.

And today was the promised day of the Great Purge. Rita's book was only half written, up through when Harry Potter began learning from Tom Riddle's horcrux spirit. She still didn't know why she was writing it or for what purpose. She wrote, she transcribed pensieve memories, she did everything she could to survive. She'd long abandoned her plots and plans for smuggling her notes out.

She wanted now only to smuggle her life out of this horror story.

True, she was treated well here. But how was a handful of strange ghost-like creatures supposed to withstand the fury of millions of muggles and thousands of witches and wizards who'd opted to remain within the United Kingdom? No, it was impossible. Hogwarts would fall; the muggles would win, they'd use their vicious weapons to end the whole struggle.

The 'cleansing' of the British Isles would never happen. Rita would stake her life on it.

She stayed as flat against the stone floor as she could. She tried to continue writing. She'd finish her work as best she could, even if she'd placed her bets on the other side coming out victorious. Really! Millions compared to an army of a hundred fifty some ghost-like wraiths. Not a difficult thing to compute.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry had had a busy forty days since confronting the Muggle Prime Minister. He'd sent a brief letter to the Ministry of Magic offering them the chance to leave as well. Then he'd begun setting up, but not engaging, powerful ward stones throughout every corner of the United Kingdom. Ancient stones that had been within the Forbidden Forest for a thousand years turned out to be remarkably well saturated with magic – and perfect for what Harry had been doing.

Harry and his army of horcrux wraithes had paid particular attention to the Muggle military installations. Bombs were silently sabotaged. Weapons broken in impossible ways.

And, every single day, they supplied increasing terror, increasing reasons for the Muggles and the magical folk to leave.

And, finally, the countdown was over.

Harry's Horrors, as he thought of them, began in London. They were purging, but they weren't killing. Stunning and dumping. He'd threatened death for the Muggles, witches, wizards, and squibs of the world, but he did not plan for it. He wanted a clean countryside, not one filled with rotting corpses. No, let them embrace the fear of death to encourage them to leave – but punish them with only permanent banishment.

The first hour's lot of purged would find themselves waking up in thirty hours in a series of fields outside Perugia in Umbria. That was the great thing about an army of horcruxes – they were invincible and had nearly an unlimited well of magic to draw upon. They didn't need to stop for sleeping or eating or anything else. They were the perfect soldiers.

Harry himself had returned to 10 Downing Street. John Major hadn't left his country, although he'd sent his wife away. The Queen was still here, but she'd bundled off most of the royal family. These high profile targets were ones Harry had called for himself.

Harry first cast the sleeping ward over the building. He caught a glint of other wards flickering here, too. The Prime Minister had obviously asked some witches and wizards for assistance.

Harry Potter, known around the world already as the Slytherin Childe, pulled a small snake out of his pocket and pushed it through the window he'd just opened. "Tell me if anyone is still awake."

Harry continued laying runes around the storied home – and around surrounding buildings, too. Perhaps the wizards had done something to ensure they could remain awake even though a sleeping ward. So Harry layered a few other items to make sure the people inside would be truly incapacitated, without harming any animals.

The snake returned minutes later. "I counted twelve asleep and two, with magic sticks, were still awake inside."

Harry nodded and thanked the snake. He hissed into the night and a pair of young basilisks, whom Harry had hatched and raised himself, slithered forward.

"Petrify anyone with a wand or a gun..."

"What's a gun?"

"Metallic looking. Weapon of muggles."

"We shall."

Harry gave the pair of his basilisks ten minutes to accomplish their task before he opened the door. All sorts of sirens, muggle-made and magical, went off but no one came storming down the stairs. Harry waved his steelwood and augurey feather wand and the world was silent again.

Harry found his basilisks on the third floor along with two petrified wizards, Aurors by the look of them. Harry looked in the Prime Minister's office and then searched the rest of the house. John Major was asleep on the desk in one of his aide's offices. A pitiful attempt at security by obscurity.

Harry slapped a small piece of paper onto John Major's forehead – a portkey. The sleeping man left seconds later for his own cell at Hogwarts Castle.

He spent the next couple of minutes placing portkeys on everyone else: these, however, were banished to a more distant locale. The two dozen who had been guarding Number 10 Downing Street awoke many hours later on a dirty street in Cusco, high in the Andes Mountains. It took months, however, to restore the Aurors who'd been petrified.

He then led one of his horcrux-wraith teams to a small town in Surrey to begin the demolition work there. There were still many millions of people to evict from his island, but he thought it prudent to demonstrate the true symbolism of what was to occur.

Harry set his wraiths to knocking down and disintegrating all the homes on Privet Drive, save for Number Four. That one – the earliest home Harry could remember when he tried – he saved for himself. He pulled out his fire wand and began burning the home, wall by wall, room by room.

He was trying to set things right, even though he knew they would never be square. No, things done were done. Memories – unlike homes – did not burn, they were not flammable.

The act of physical destruction merely felt good. However, brief happy memories did little to counteract years of miserable, painful ones.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Rita cried herself to sleep. The little monster had sent back her third draft – and had added a 'suggestion' this time. "Remove your ridiculous opinions from the book or I'll feed you to Serah."

That was how she wrote. A few facts, carelessly chosen, then liberally flavored with opinion. The boy wanted the impossible – he wanted facts only, little interpretation, and next to no sharing of

opinions. It was dry, boring – no one would voluntarily want to read it if she wrote it that way. And it would be way too short to be a real book.

She cursed a few times before falling completely into the darkness of sleep.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

In the weeks that followed, the Great Purge moved forward at a rapid – but never fast enough – pace. Never stopping teams of wraiths banished every remaining muggle, witch, wizard, and squib. Harry and the remaining humans he controlled through horcruxes – the Flamels, Mr. Slughorn, Ollivander, Gwenog Jones, and a few others – began the process of disintegrating much of the detritus left behind. Automobiles returned to their component elements, as did houses and tall buildings. Harry threw seeds of plants and trees over every cleansed inch and instructed the remaining house elves to tend them.

Within five years, there would be little evidence that millions of men and women had ever inhabited these lands.

But the masterwork came as Harry Potter finally activated the thousands of massive ward stones he'd located all across the island. In that moment, when all that magic flickered into effect, the entirety of the British Isles disappeared from view, from mind, from memory.

It was the largest installation of a ward ever attempted – the Fidelius Charm, as popularly known, was actually a warding technique. And one that Harry had just employed in the largest show of magical might in a thousand years.

Phase two began a week after the wards went up.

Harry's Horrors began tracking down every sort of magical animal, particularly snakes, and offering them new homes. Few accepted at first, but they were told they would be asked again in the future.

The Horrors also replenished the full spectrum of the wildlife population by 'borrowing' from other nations. Deer, rabbits, voles,

foxes, and badgers; nonmagical animals of all shapes and sizes. Dragons were once again welcomed inside the Island, as Harry found he could speak with them. Occamy made it a home; runespoors, too.

The Slytherin Childe finally felt at home.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Rita Skeeter, Cornelius Fudge, and John Major landed unconscious behind a bar in Barcelona seven months after the Great Purge began. After they were discovered by Muggles – and Major was, of course, recognized for who he was – it took nearly a week for the magical authorities to extricate Rita and Cornelius.

Then it was time for Rita to talk.

Her problem? She had nothing to say. She knew nothing at all about where she'd been.

"That's ridiculous, Ms. Skeeter. Surely you must know something..."

She shrugged.

"I know I don't have my wand or my quill and notebook. I know I woke up scantily dressed about a week ago curled up with the deposed British Prime Minister and Minister of Magic. I don't remember the last dozen stories you showed me with my name attached to them. That, gentlemen, is what I know..."

"Not acceptable."

"Give me Veritaserum. Find a Legilimens to probe my mind. Hire someone gifted in breaking memory charms. I'd personally like to know what I've been doing for the last few months. I'd be grateful if you could tell me what I've been up to..."

The people interrogating her weren't in the mood to be helpful.

"You were in Britain after that secrecy ward went up. Do you remember where it is? How to get back, that sort of thing?"

Rita Skeeter closed her eyes and thought on it. Eventually she shook her head.

“I remember that there is a Britain. I remember the house I grew up in, but I can’t place it in context to anything else, not even what city it was within...”

More than one sigh rippled around the room.

“What have you been doing, Ms. Skeeter? And why are you still alive? If you were there after the Great Purge, you must have been helping him – that blasted Slytherin Childe – in some way. Tell us now!”

But she had nothing to say. And, eventually, the charms experts and the mind arts practitioners came in to attempt to open her mind. And nothing gave. She spent the rest of her rather lengthy life under lock and key. No one could prove she was a collaborator in the Great Purge – just as no one could prove she wasn’t. It wasn’t safe to leave someone like her in the general public. Not safe at all.

Rita wondered nearly every day if this was what had been intended for her. If so, it seemed crueler than just killing her. Far more so. Alive, but imprisoned only for the sake of her lacking a memory. A life restored to her and taken from her at the same instant her memory had been taken; positively Slytherin.

Positively devastating.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A twenty year old Slytherin Childe closed the massive tome he’d been writing in – the Potter Family Grimoire. He was discovering new branches of magic, plus branches forgotten to time or ignored because they originated with snakes or dragons, at an astonishing rate. Every discovery was written down, everything catalogued.

Harry Potter had discovered that fourteen thousand square miles of land – and only a single castle residing within the borders – made for

quite a perfect testing laboratory. Plants lost to the British Isles were returning; magic returned to nearly every corner of the land, where it had once been hacked away by encroaching muggles; three colonies of Sirens had broken through the outer wards – but not the nastiest of the secrecy wards – and settled in around the Orkneys. Goblins had gone back to their first love, digging tunnels and scouting for minerals and other interesting resources. But they had turned what little was left of Diagon Alley into a goblin village.

Centaur and their animosity had prompted the extension of the Purge toward their race. They'd all been banished in a single evening to Tierra del Fuego. But examining their former home had taught Harry some rather intriguing centaur warding schemes. Different from wizarding and goblin versions, but powerful and unexpected in their own ways.

Horace Slughorn had asked to perform his service as a wraith, so Harry had killed his mortal body. And he'd rediscovered several lines of inquiry into necromancy because of it.

He needed to ensure the ongoing magical security of his Island, so he'd had to work out how to auto-renew the magics surrounding and penetrating the ward stones even when they were placed in definitely non-magical areas. The research there on self-perpetuating runic ward structures would have earned him an Order of Merlin under the old, inept government. Laughable. But it had many follow-on applications. Harry maintained listening posts throughout the world, stretching thousands of miles in every direction, and the wards never needed maintenance. And would likely never be detected, even though they were located inside the highest levels of magical and nonmagical governments in every country. Harry Potter wanted to ensure he knew if people were coming to attack him.

There were hundreds of other small things he and his horcrux wraiths had discovered. All of which he documented in the Potter Family Grimoire.

And that led to the final problem: reestablishing the Potter Family. Harry was evidently the last of a very long line. But Ollivander had

been the one to suggest that Harry hadn't been the only unwanted orphan in the world.

So the horcrux wraiths began a semi-annual hunt across the globe for magical orphan children. And the former Hogwarts Castle began to fill up with the sounds of laughter and young voices.

The old way hadn't worked – wizards hiding from Muggles, ignoring and fearing them at the same time with Muggles advancing in technology and the wizards stagnating. Perhaps this new way would suffice. One family to an island, a soon-to-be massive family.

Harry had lessons to give in twenty minutes, lessons for his growing children. But he had a few minutes to kill so he re-read the beginning of a familiar section of the Grimoire, a historical section written for him, unknowingly, by Rita Skeeter.

“Harry Potter took up the alias of Slytherin Childe at some point before his eleventh birthday in order to honor the snakes of various species who tended him and befriended him and taught him...”

The words were true and lean and honest. They had almost nothing of the author in them, as was proper. He re-read her brief additions to the Grimoire before adding a few final lines of his own.

“I could have been ‘love’ or ‘kindness’ or ‘honor’ had I been raised in that fashion. But I was ‘snake’ in my views and actions because they were the ones who loved me, thus I gave people a single chance to make right their mistakes against me, against the innocents in Azkaban, and when they failed, I struck and struck and struck. Eventually I wonder if people will ever learn that the seeming least of their actions can have consequences that ripple or even tear through history. Perhaps not, as most people cannot learn at all.”

He closed the book, tucked it away behind the security wards in his little treasure room, and headed out to begin teaching his lessons. These, his children, would learn because they would understand why it was important. And the Potter family would continue on, looking less like its recent past and more like its ancient past. A family of spell researchers and mercenaries, powerful people cloaked in the

shadows. The Potters would become great again. And, thus, the world came full circle.